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Introduction

Michael Holquist
Indiana University

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Introduction

Abstract

Introduction to the special issue on Mikhail Bakhtin

Keywords

Bakhtin, dialogue, Bakhtian dialogue, superaddress, subject, communication, kerygma

INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL HOLQUIST
Indiana University

Dialogue is the word most frequently used to describe the central concern of Bakhtin's thought. For all its obvious utility, the term has certain drawbacks. Chief among these is the strong suggestion that dialogue is something that happens between two persons or groups, whereas the most novel feature of Bakhtin's concept of dialogue is that it is a triadic phenomenon. He argues that whatever a speaking subject says is conditioned by that subject's concept of the addressee to whom he is speaking. His dictum that the word is a two-sided act is invoked by others with increasing frequency, but it is less often appreciated that in Bakhtinian dialogue there is not only the speaking subject's conception of the immediate audience he is addressing—the particular person he talks to in an intimate conversation or the specific audience to which a book is directed—but that in addition there is always the speaking subject's concept of a "superaddressee" (*nadadresar*) behind the immediate addressee. A specific addressee, no matter how well known or sympathetic, is always capable of misunderstanding. What makes communication possible at all, insists Bakhtin, is the speaking (or writing) subject's conviction that he will be understood: everyone speaks and writes as if he were heard not only by his immediate audience, but as if he were heard as well by an addressee who will understand, as no actual addressee can ever understand, the fullest meaning, the furthest implications and deepest subtleties—what theologians sometimes call *kerygma*. Communication is an act of faith and what serves to sustain the certainty that our words will be understood is not the frequently miscarried experience of actually trying to convey a meaning to someone else. Rather, it is the deeply held conviction that beyond any specific act of communication we essay, there is somewhere, somehow the *possibility* of being under-

stood. For certain writers that possibility is rooted in a superaddressee who is a future reader, able to grasp their message over the chasm of centuries, as was the case for Stendhal and Mandelshtam; for others, the superaddressee is the ideal representative of a social class, as for instance the proletariat to whom Marx and Engels addressed *The Communist Manifesto*. And for others, the superaddressee is God.

Bakhtin lived all his life in dialogue: in dialogue with his friends Voloshinov and Kagan, or with other writers and thinkers such as Dostoevsky, Rabelais or Freud. But by far the most intense dialogue he participated in was the one he conducted with himself over the course of his long life in the pages of his notebooks. In published works, such as "Discourse in the Novel," he manages to be so powerful on the subject of confessional literature because for more than sixty of his eighty-one years he used his notebooks as a vehicle for interrogating himself. His deep theoretical sympathy with Saint Augustine or Marcus Aurelius in their attempts to account to themselves for their selves was inspired by his own practice of daily using the pages of his notebooks as his superaddressee.

How this self-examination worked we can see in the notebooks Bakhtin kept while preparing certain of his essays to be published in 1975. In reviewing his earlier works (which were among the last to be published), he asks himself in his notebooks what is unique about his work, distinctively his own. And from the vantage point of his old age (he died in the same year) and the privacy provided by the coarse paper in his *tetrad*i (student pads), he concludes that the distinguishing feature of his works is a certain unfinished quality. In his theoretical work on poetics (especially in the essays that were published in 1975) Bakhtin praises the quality of being unfinished as the secret of the novel's superiority over other genres. In other works "unfinishedness" (*nezaveršennost'*) is praised as the loophole in any text that guarantees the possibility of others entering into dialogue with it: the loophole guarantees freedom for the reader, and thus future life for the text.

But in his last notebooks, as he surveys his earlier works, Bakhtin is careful in his own accounting to himself to distinguish between this positive kind of unfinishedness, which he sought consciously to enact in his writings, and another, negative kind which results from an author's incapacity to deal in an adequate way with his chosen subject and which therefore leads to confusion in his readers. A burning question for the dying Bakhtin was whether the frequently remarked

unfinished nature of his works was a mark of their openness or merely a sign of an all-pervasive confusion.

The questions and doubts Bakhtin submitted to the privacy of his notebooks now must be answered by his readers present and future; only history will tell whether the unfinished quality (that currently is the only aspect of his works on which all readers agree) is a negative fuzziness or a positive openness.

While it is still too early to make a final judgement—Bakhtin's principle of the loophole states it will *always* be too late to render final judgement—the overwhelming evidence of recent seminars, conferences and of this impressive collection of papers brought together by Clive Thomson all seems to attest to the conclusion that Bakhtin's peculiar unfinishedness is of a kind that is seminal rather than muddleheaded. He will always arouse controversy, and the hope of some Bakhtin specialists that when more is known about him we shall be able to denounce certain existing appropriations of Bakhtin as wrong (or at least as un-Bakhtinian) appears increasingly naive. While it may be premature to compare him to such well-established legislators of modern sensibility as Marx or Freud, he has at least one thing in common with such giants: the ideas of each are so strong they can be usefully assimilated to a variety of schemes that from a more narrow perspective would appear to be mutually exclusive. That Bakhtin figures so convincingly in the various languages used by different authors in the present collection—from the highly technical Hallidayan linguistics of Paul Thibault to Ann Shukman's evocation of Bakhtin as "a Christian mystic of humility and vision"—indicates that he possesses at least one attribute of all major thinkers, the ability to be appropriated by the most various arguments in ways that enrich the general significance of them all.

The nature and extent of Bakhtin's achievement are still in process of being defined, a process to which all of these essays contribute. Nina Perlina's essay places two important aspects of Bakhtin's thinking into a historical and philosophical context. As she demonstrates, there are close parallels between Bakhtin's concept of dialogue and Martin Buber's ideas on the nature of the subject. A particularly important aspect of her reconstruction is the seminal role played by Hermann Cohen in the careers of both men. Cohen is such an important influence for the young Bakhtin that it is possible to date some of the earlier work on the basis of how much or how little of his distinctive terminology Bakhtin is using: in the very earliest work there is a good deal, in the later texts, almost none. The first phase in

Bakhtin's biography (the period from 1918, when he leaves the university, to 1924, when he moves from western Russia back to Leningrad) has a distinct pattern: Bakhtin moves rapidly away from Marburg Neokantianism to positions more uniquely his own. But Cohen's constantly iterated principle, "The world is not given, but conceived" (*Die Welt ist nicht gegeben, aber aufgegeben*), became the rallying cry not only for the whole Marburg school itself, but for the early Bakhtin circle as well. It was so often invoked by the young Bakhtin and his friends Pumpiansky, Yudina, Tubyansky and others, that Konstantin Vaginov, in his *roman à clef* about the circle, *The Satyr's Song*, uses the phrase as their iconic attribute.

In speaking of Cohen's influence on Bakhtin, we must discriminate between at least three phases of Cohen's career: the first, when he published long commentaries on Kant's works and was famous as the most thorough of Kant's many exegetes; a second period when Cohen sets out his own philosophy; and a third, after his retirement in 1912 and removal to Berlin, when he seeks to blend metaphysics with the Talmud to produce a new philosophy of religion. My only quarrel with Professor Perlina's fine paper is that she invokes the Cohen of the first phase, whereas it is at least arguable that it was the Cohen of the final period, the man who authored *The Religion of Reason Out of Sources in Judaism* (1918), who was most important as a model for Bakhtin.

A special word should be said about Clive Thomson, who has been a major force in acquainting a wider audience with Bakhtin's work: he not only organized the symposium from which many of the papers in the present collection were selected, but arranged as well the first of what now appears to be a series of international conferences at two-year intervals on Bakhtin. In addition, he is the founding editor of *The International Bakhtin Newsletter* and compiler of very useful Bakhtin bibliographies. As his paper here makes evident, he is a critic-scholar as well as an organizer. He deals with a major recurring concern in Bakhtin's works, the powerful but little-understood workings of genre, both in and outside literary discourse. The paper makes two fundamentally important points about the Bakhtinian conception of genre: 1) differences between genres are not absolute, but only relative, and therefore mutable; and 2) the frequently made charge that Bakhtin "disliked" poetry has little basis in Bakhtin's work if it is read with sufficient care—the kind of care Thomson has devoted to it. Bakhtin is increasingly attractive to Marxist critics; and Thomson's demonstration of how Fredric Jameson and Bakhtin can

mutually illuminate each other is helpful in showing why this should be so.

Anthony Wall's paper is sensitive to the feature of Bakhtin's concept of character that makes it so widely useful, even in an age when studies of character have become suspect because of the psychologistic and moralizing discourse that has plagued this area of criticism. Wall brings out nicely the point that characters must be treated by their readers as well as by their authors (such an extensive concept in Bakhtin) as having consciousness, without analysis of that consciousness necessarily devolving into a galloping personalism. His approach to Bakhtin is characteristic of the best writing on Bakhtin, as when he says, "There is no single Bakhtin and we have tried to recognize this aspect of his theoretical texts by letting pertinent passages cross one another dialogically, as it were, in answer to questions put to them in our study."

Ann Shukman's piece is yet another example of her ongoing effort to make available to Western readers the most exciting developments in Russian and East European literary theory. She takes advantage of her thorough background in the Russian ambience to foreground two texts that might otherwise have been ignored, but which, as she shows in her essay, have implications for anyone trying to understand the central and vexed question of Bakhtin's relation to Tolstoy, virtually a totemic figure for Bakhtin and invoked by him early and late in a number of different contexts.

Pierrette Malcuzyński's essay is a good example of how Bakhtinian categories can be used in close readings of individual texts. What is particularly interesting in her demonstration is that her practical criticism has worked so well in application to the kind of experimental text Bakhtin himself is so often criticized for having ignored in his own writings.

Paul Thibault's impressive reading of a passage from Nabokov's *Ada* is another exercise in practical criticism, but is chiefly remarkable for demonstrating Bakhtin's relevance for modern linguistics—the unexpectedly persuasive congruence between dialogism and Michael Halliday's more systematically conceived discourse analysis.

Robert Polzin's essay is an attempt to appropriate Bakhtin for the burgeoning field of scholars who read and teach the Bible as literature, without regard to claims made on behalf of the canonical status of the Bible as revealed Truth, the word of God. Polzin's essay has a certain intrinsic interest, but it achieves this quality by ignoring some

of the basic problems that a text as ideologically imbricated as the Bible must raise. By avoiding that aspect of the Bible, Polzin skirts as well a central component of Bakhtin's thought—the conviction that no text can be meaningfully interpreted outside the roles it has played in politics and history.

I am not sure whether the editor intended the contrast, but the essay by Maroussia Ahmed, which precedes the Polzin piece, is an illustration of how Bakhtin can be used to read cultural texts. Going beyond the banal level at which Bakhtinian carnival is understood merely as a version of what the Russian Formalists called de-familiarization, a model of literary history based on a struggle between old and new styles, Ahmed shows how such a struggle is orchestrated by social forces that are more powerful and comprehensive than a history that is exclusively literary can entertain. By demonstrating how the novel has *failed* to invert the hierarchy of values that characterizes French provincial culture in the new world, she succeeds in carnivalizing certain of Bakhtin's ideas about the novel as a genre, but more importantly—as he would agree—she calls into question extraliterary political and religious trends still very much at work in that society.

Caryl Emerson's extension of Bakhtin's ideas about genre into a discussion of relations between literary and musical texts not only illuminates a major problem in Russian cultural history (the extraordinary vitality of the pretender theme), but opens up new territory for genre studies in general.

Ann Shukman has commented on the Gasparov piece, so I will say nothing about it except to remark the sad fact that it stands almost alone: it is nearly the only recent comment on Bakhtin of any consequence that has appeared in his own homeland. Readers abroad have become, for the moment, Bakhtin's superaddressee. There is a lugubrious symmetry in a Soviet diminution of interest in Bakhtin that so neatly corresponds to a rising excitement about his ideas abroad. It is good to have the present collection, then, because it is part of the effort scholars all over the world are making to keep open the dialogue with Bakhtin. But before Western readers congratulate themselves for making such an effort, it should be remembered by us all that the uncritical reception of a major thinker's ideas may be just as dangerous to his reputation as enforced neglect. Thus another reason to welcome this anthology is that it will go a long way to offset some of the hastiness and imprecision that now characterizes so much work flaunting a Bakhtinian inspiration.